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ABSTRACT

Over the years, many different labels have been used to describe nontraditional students. This study examined whether terminology used in surveys could affect respondents' answers. Two forms of a questionnaire were designed and distributed randomly to college students. One form consistently employed the terms gay, lesbian, and bisexual while the other form employed the term homosexual. On 29 of the 30 items, there were no significant differences between the two groups. However, on one item, the difference was significant. In the true-false statement, "I have had at least one homosexual experience during the last year," only 2.5% of the respondents marked it true. However, for the statement, "I have had at least one sexual experience with someone of my gender during the last year," 10.4% of respondents indicated this as true. It is speculated that the term "homosexual" seemed to generate some negative reactions and that respondents did not want to see themselves as homosexual. It is concluded that if researchers wish to measure behavior, it may be preferable to avoid any labeling and to be as operational as possible. Contains 11 references. (RJM)

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# Does it Matter?

William E. Sedlacek, & Sue H. Kim

Research Report #12-96

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## Summary

Two forms of a questionnaire were designed and distributed randomly to 399 UMCP students. One form consistently employed the terms gay, lesbian, and bisexual while the other form employed the term homosexual. For example, one item stated "I think gay men and lesbians need psychological or medical help" on one form while the item was stated "I think homosexuals need psychological or medical help" on the other form.

On 29 of the 30 items, there were no significant differences by form between the two groups. (Chi square .05 level). However, on one item, the difference was significant. On one form, the true-false item stated "I have had at least one homosexual experience during the last year". On the other form, the item stated "I have had at least one sexual experience with someone of my gender during the last year". Only 2.5% of the respondents indicated "true" on the "homosexual" form whereas 10.4% of the respondents indicated "true" on the "same gender" form. What are we to conclude from this? It could be chance since it was the only significant difference found, and we could be committing a Type I error by assuming difference where none may exist.

However, it may be that if one wished to measure affect or attitudes, the term "homosexual" would seem to generate some negative reactions. Respondents likely did not want to see themselves as homosexual. If, however, one is attempting to measure behavior, it may be preferable to avoid any labeling (e.g., homosexual) and to be as operational as possible.

What is in a name? Shakespeare said a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. But would it? We know that people have strong political, social, and personal reactions to labels. Among college students, we have seen a shift in self-identification terms from Negro to Black to African American over the years with accompanying implications for how they might be viewed by others (Sedlacek, 1996) and how they might feel about themselves (Helms, 1992).

Borrowing a page from Shakespeare, Westbrook and Sedlacek (1991) found that over the years we have gone through different labels to describe what the authors called "nontraditional" students. Terms focusing on acculturation were common in the 1950's, followed by difference and disadvantage in the 1960's, culture-specific references in the 1970's, and a multicultural label in the 1980's. They concluded that whatever labels may have been, we were still were discussing persons who have little economic power, and are the victims of some systematic prejudice in the system. What is politically and socially correct at a given time may serve to obscure this reality.

Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues

In recent years, increased attention has been given to gay, lesbian and bisexual issues among college students (e.g., Evans and Wall, 1991; Dworkin and Gutierrez, 1992). At the time of this writing, gay, lesbian, and bisexual are the terms generally accepted as the best politically and socially which would allow for the most positive identity development among gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals (e.g., Burkholder and Dineen, 1996). Is the issue then moot? Should we not be concerned about labels as we do research on gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues?

Researchers have consistently found social distance to be related to prejudice among college students toward groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, Arabs, Jews, and American Indians. (Ancis, Bennett-Choney and Sedlacek, 1996; Gerson and Sedlacek, 1994; Miville,

Sergent, and Sedlacek, 1993; Sedlacek, 1996; White and Sedlacek, 1987.)

However, social distance may not be as simple a construct to use in studying gay, lesbian and bisexual issues. Washington (1993) found that among resident assistants at a large predominantly White university, there was less prejudice toward gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in one-on-one interactions and more prejudice in situations requiring a show of public support for gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues. Fox (1995) found similar results for African American resident assistants at historically Black colleges and universities. One possible explanation for these findings could be that as one thinks that he/she may be perceived by others or may perceive oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, a negative reaction develops. However, in a situation less likely to suggest that one may actually be gay, lesbian, or bisexual, attitudes are more positive.

In other words, a person may be able to give one-on-one counseling or advice to a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person and feel comfortable, but may demonstrate prejudice if asked to attend an event or develop or conduct a program on behalf of gays, lesbians, or bisexuals.

The Current Study

A 30 item anonymous questionnaire on sexual attitudes and behaviors was administered to a representative sample of 399 freshmen entering a large university during their orientation. Over 90% of all new freshmen attended the orientation. A number of the items concerned gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues. Two forms of the instrument were designed and distributed randomly to students in group sessions on separate dates chosen randomly from orientation dates.

One form consistently employed the terms gay, lesbian, and bisexual while the other form employed the term homosexual. For example, one item stated "I think gay men and lesbians need psychological or medical help" on one form while the item was stated "I think homosexuals need

psychological or medical help" on the other form.

The results showed that Shakespeare was mostly correct since on 29 of the 30 items, there were no significant differences by form between the two groups. (Chi square .05 level). However, on one item, the difference was significant. On one form, the true-false item stated "I have had at least one homosexual experience during the last year". On the other form, the item stated "I have had at least one sexual experience with someone of my gender during the last year". Only 2.5% of the respondents indicated "true" on the "homosexual" form whereas 10.4% of the respondents indicated "true" on the "same gender" form. What are we to conclude from this? It could be chance since it was the only significant difference found, and we could be committing a Type I error by assuming difference where none may exist.

However, upon closer inspection, it seems to fit with some of the literature noted earlier. Sedlacek (1996) noted that if one is attempting to measure prejudice,one should use the term that elicits the strongest reaction in the respondents, rather than what is the correct term politically or from a social science point of view. For example, "Arab" is an imprecise term which may not work well historically or in political terms, but it is a stimulus that generates negative reactions among college students (Miville, Sergent, and Sedlacek, 1993).

Thus, if one wished to measure affect or attitudes, the term "homosexual" would seem to generate some negative reactions. Respondents likely did not want to see themselves as homosexual. This is supported by Abler and Sedlacek (1989) who found that university students in the 1980's were more likely to want to hide the fact they were homosexual than were students in the 1970's.

If, however, one is attempting to measure behavior, it may be preferable to avoid any labeling (e.g., homosexual) and to be as operational as possible. As we continue to study new groups in more depth it is important to consider the implications of our methodology and particularly our wording of items. Many of our research principles can be applied in new areas. However, we need to know how those principles may give us different results with different groups so our studies can be more informative and less subject to misinterpretation.

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